

Destination Afghanistan

When Lonely Planet was hitting the Asia overland trail in the 1970s, Afghanistan was known for its dramatic mountain scenery and the unparalleled hospitality of its people. At the turn of the 21st century the country was more synonymous with war and terrorism, the picture of a failed state. The fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the subsequent reconstruction attempts have done much to address this view, but in early 2007 Afghanistan's future remained on a knife-edge.

Having been bled white by 10 years of Soviet occupation, Afghanistan was dropped by the international community almost the minute the last Red Army tank withdrew in 1989, allowing it to slip into the chaos of civil war and the Taliban. Promises not to repeat the same mistake 13 years later proved half-hearted at best. Progress in development of education and the political process (which have seen successful presidential and parliamentary elections) are real enough. Kabul and other cities have boomed with increasing trade and new constructions. Most of the country is at peace, but the state remains perilously weak. The return to power of many of the rejected warlords of the 1990s has cynically proved to Afghans that you can apparently have peace or justice, but not both. The booming economy has failed to touch the countryside where most Afghans live and development programmes have mostly ignored the important agricultural sector, particularly in the Pashtun regions that originally spawned the Taliban.

Afghanistan's rugged landscape and tribal patchwork has never allowed it a strong central government, and attempts by the international community to build one have been patchy. The economy is dependent on aid, and in 2006 domestic revenues raised just US\$13 per capita. This pales in comparison with the 6100 tonnes of opium produced in the same period – over half the value of the legal economy. Opium corrodes the fragile state, reaching from bribed provincial cops to the centres of power in Kabul, and out into the developed world. Over 90% of the heroin on the streets of the UK comes from Afghanistan.

Ever the meddling neighbour, Pakistan has continued to play a double game in Afghanistan. Islamabad has been a key partner in public in the War on Terror, but stands accused of giving sanctuary to the Taliban leadership it once helped into power. The Waziristan compact it signed in 2006 to quell a tribal rebellion on its own troubled frontier has provided both a reservoir and safe haven for Taliban fighters operating in southern Afghanistan. Flush with opium money and drawing new inspiration from the Iraqi insurgency, Taliban attacks set swathes of southern Afghanistan ablaze in 2006, drawing NATO forces into heavy combat.

Is the Afghan glass half-empty or half-full? Continued and improved international commitment is crucial for Afghanistan's success. Afghans still welcome foreigners who come to the country to help, knowing full well the cost of neglect. At the time of writing, international sabre-rattling over Iran fuels Afghan fears that the country will again slip off the radar. Progress is slow and painful, but possible. A peaceful, stable Afghanistan is still there to be won – the costs of losing it again are simply too high for everyone.

FAST FACTS

Population: 31 million
(2006 estimate)

Population under 14:
approximately 14 million

Refugee population
outside Afghanistan:
approximately 2 million

Adult literacy: 36%

Infant mortality rate:
160 per 1000 live births

Gross Domestic Product
per capita: US\$800

Main exports: opium,
fruits and nuts, handwoven
carpets, wool, hides
and pelts, gems

Main imports: petroleum
products, food, textiles,
machinery

Ranking on UN Human
Development Index:
173 (out of 178)

Getting Started

By any stretch of the imagination, Afghanistan isn't the simplest country to travel in. For the visitor, it's a world away from backpacking in Thailand or island-hopping in Greece. It's a country recovering from nearly three decades of war, with a host of continuing problems. You'll need to invest time getting the latest safety information, and news from other travellers or colleagues working in the country.

But with the right preparations, and a constant ear to the ground once you're there, travel in Afghanistan is not only a possibility but also incredibly rewarding. The post-Taliban scene has brought investment to the country for the first time in years, and the logistics of getting around and finding somewhere to stay has become increasingly straightforward. Not only that, it's an addictive country to visit. Once in Afghanistan, there's something about the people, the history and even the air that can get in your blood and promise to draw you back again. Do your research, and you'll find Afghanistan a truly rewarding country.

SHOULD YOU GO?

The rebuilding of Afghanistan's shattered infrastructure continues to be painfully slow. Its culture has been pillaged and its people scattered, and discontent in the south and east has reignited into a full-blown Taliban insurgency. While many international workers continue their jobs under often tricky conditions, Afghan embassies are happy enough to give out tourist visas to those who ask. But should you go?

The prime concern is security, and we do not advocate people putting themselves at risk. It's vital to understand that safety and security issues are anything but static in Afghanistan – things can change rapidly and it would be irresponsible of us to give prescriptive safety advice. Be aware that at the time of research, the US, British and Australian governments were all advising against non-essential travel to Afghanistan. For a detailed analysis of security issues in Afghanistan, see the *Safety in Afghanistan* chapter (p68), but remember that this chapter is only a starting point for your own research. Only you are responsible for your safety, so it's absolutely

Foreign women shouldn't attempt to wear the burqa – for more information on dress codes see p211.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- An Afghan visa in your passport (see p210).
- A travel insurance policy that actually covers you for travel to Afghanistan (see p205).
- The latest news from the ground, and safety information (see p68).
- Non-revealing clothes, with arms and legs covered for both sexes. Headscarves for women are strongly recommended. Wearing respectful attire will get you a better reception in Afghanistan.
- Water purification treatment.
- Lip balm, sunscreen, sunglasses and hat for protection against the strong mountain light and desert sun.
- A torch for when the electricity inevitably fails.
- A sleeping bag – essential for winter, and useful for anywhere off the beaten track.
- A taste for tea – no business or social meeting can take place without an endlessly replenished cuppa.

essential that before considering a visit you assess the security situation from reliable, up-to-date sources.

Choosing to travel in an organised tour, where a company has experience on the ground and access to reliable security information can be a preferable alternative to going independently without any support network, and there are now several reliable tour operators working out of Kabul.

If security constraints allow it, we believe that visiting Afghanistan can be a highly positive experience. Tourism is by no means a panacea for Afghanistan's myriad problems, and the tourist vanguard has a special responsibility travelling in a socially conservative country recovering from war. One of the most common laments you'll hear in Afghanistan is how the world forgot them after the Soviet War. Foreigners can help Afghans reconnect with the world, and to allow them to be seen as individuals rather than victims of war, while putting money into the local economy has a more tangible direct benefit.

A visit to Afghanistan, with its amputees and women begging in burqas, can be a shock. If you want to have a more positive impact, you might want to consider donating time or money to aid agencies working in the country. There are dozens to choose from, and some are better than others, so pick carefully. Ask how long they have been working in Afghanistan, what role the local community plays in their projects and how sustainability is monitored.

WHEN TO GO

Assuming that the political climate allows you to make a trip, the most pleasant time to explore Afghanistan is spring or autumn, in particular April to early June and September through October. In spring, north Afghanistan turns from dusty ochre to bright green, as the desert and hills spring into life and are studded with blooms of flowers. Autumn is harvest time and brings the best of the Afghan fruit – melons from the north, grapes from the Shomali Plain and fat pomegranates from Kandahar.

Summers can be blisteringly hot at lower altitudes, with cities like Herat, Mazar-e Sharif, Jalalabad and Kandahar sweltering in temperatures topping 40°C. The mountains mitigate this heatwave, and Kabul, Bamiyan and Faizabad are all more manageable at this time, and their altitude blesses them with deliciously cooler nights. June to September is the best time to head to the higher mountains – much of Badakhshan (including the Wakhan Corridor) is inaccessible for the rest of the year due to snow. The white stuff can also make crossing central Afghanistan to the Minaret of Jam extremely difficult outside these months, as roads and high passes close for the winter. Even the Salang Pass, the main artery between north and south Afghanistan, experiences avalanches and blockages a few times every winter.

Winter is harsh across the country barring the extreme south, with temperatures sitting below zero and heavy snow in Kabul and elsewhere. The spring melt can bring trouble of its own, with frequent floods washing out poorly maintained roads.

At the end of winter, everyone looks forward to Nauroz on 21 March, the Afghan New Year celebrations. This can be a joyous time to visit the country, and one of the best times to see the national sport, *buzkashi* (p57). Conversely, the month-long fast of Ramazan (Ramadan; p203) can be a trying time to be on the road, as restaurants and tea-houses are closed during the day, and frequently shut up shop for the entire month.

See Climate Charts (p201) for more information.

HOW MUCH?

Internet access (per hour):

50Afg

100km minibus ride: 90Afg

One minute phone call to

USA/UK: 20Afg

City taxi ride: 80Afg

2kg melon: 40Afg

COSTS & MONEY

Afghanistan is by turn both an incredibly cheap and very expensive country to travel in. While the daily costs of eating, drinking and travelling by local transport are relatively low, the cost of accommodation can be high, and travelling by private vehicle very expensive. The large influx of foreign workers with large expense accounts and an economy reliant on imported goods has produced a two-tier system, where dual pricing for locals and foreigners is not uncommon. Payment in US dollars is almost as universally accepted as payment in afghanis.

Roughly speaking, if you opt for the simplest hotels, eat only in local restaurants and at street food stands (and avoid imported groceries, which are available in most towns), and travel only using local transport; you can get by on around 1000Afg to 1200Afg per day.

If you've been roughing it and need a night in a comfier bed, or a break from an endless diet of kebabs and rice, a single room at a midrange hotel ranges from 1500Afg to 3000Afg per night. Many places charge a flat rate for the room, so sharing a double can cut costs considerably. Kabul is the most expensive place in the country, and a midrange room can cost up to 4000Afg. Top end hotels – almost all of these are in the capital – cost upwards of this, to around 6000Afg. The recent boom in hotel building in Kabul means that many top end places frequently offer generous discounts, which can bring their rates down to the midrange, so don't be shy about asking. Discounted rates are frequently available for long-term occupancy.

For more details on money issues, see p206.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Afghanistan is blessed with incredibly rich travel literature. Any of the following will help prime you for your trip (for other recommendations, see History, p25, and The Culture, p41).

The Sewing Circles of Herat by Christina Lamb wonderfully stitches together accounts of the author's time with the mujaheddin (including a young Hamid Karzai) with a return to post-Taliban Afghanistan to produce a beautifully balanced mix of reportage and travel writing.

The Storyteller's Daughter by Saira Shah is a highly evocative memoir of an Afghan journalist raised in Britain examining her roots through the lens of the war against the Russians and the Taliban chaos. Our favourite book on Afghanistan in the past few years.

The Places In Between by Rory Stewart is the account of an incredible journey walking across central Afghanistan in mid-winter, months after the fall of the Taliban. Pensive and well-observed, it's a great companion for anyone heading for that part of Afghanistan.

Peregrine Hodson's *Under A Sickle Moon* is one of the few 'travels with the mujaheddin' books to stand the test of time, a keen account of one corner of the war that's helped enormously by the author's fluent Dari and eye for character.

Ostensibly a quest for the roots of Islamic architecture, *The Road to Oxiana* by Robert Byron is still the best travel book on Afghanistan (and Persia), more than 70 years after it was written. Few characters in the travel literature genre are as memorable as the show-stealing Afghan ambassador to Tehran.

A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush by Eric Newby is one of the modern classics of travel writing, describing the misadventures of two Englishmen who trekked to the remote Nuristan region in the 1950s. It has one of the best (and funniest) endings of any travel book.

In *An Unexpected Light*, Jason Elliot dazzles the reader with a journey around Afghanistan on the eve of the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. Elliot displays a sympathetic ear and a keen understanding of the richness of Afghan culture and history.

The Light Garden of the Angel King is a scholarly but still colourful account of author Peter Levi's travels in Afghanistan with Bruce Chatwin in the 1970s. Finely written, with suitably distinguished footnotes.

A Bed of Red Flowers by Nelofer Pazira is a lyrical memoir of life growing up in 1970s Kabul, the Soviet occupation and her family's flight to Pakistan and Canada as refugees. The denouement, in Kabul and Moscow, is highly moving.

Kandahar Cockney by James Fergusson takes a different approach to the travel genre, describing the complicated life of an Afghan friend who fled to London as a refugee. A revealing portrait of an under-reported side to recent Afghan history.

Tamim Ansary's *West of Kabul, East of New York* is a revealing memoir of growing up in '50s and '60s Lashkar Gah and Kabul, and a life lived in the USA, straddling the cultures of his Afghan father and American mother.

Magic Bus is Rory Maclean's witty and engaging retracing of the old Hippy Trail from Istanbul to Kabul and Goa. Looking at the changes in the countries en route and the metamorphosis from spaced-out intrepids to modern backpackers, it's highly recommended.

INTERNET RESOURCES

These websites may assist with trip planning, and keep you informed of Afghan news, safety issues, culture and more.

Afghan News Network (www.afghannews.net) Useful news portal covering Afghan current affairs.

Afghan Web (www.afghan-web.com) Generic country portal, with sections on just about all aspects of Afghanistan.

Afghan Wire (www.afghanwire.com) English translations of stories in the Afghan media, with an encyclopaedic 'backgrounder' section on Afghan history, culture and politics.

Institute for War & Peace Reporting (www.iwpr.net) Runs the useful weekly *Afghan Recovery Report*, written by Afghan journalists.

International Crisis Group (www.crisisgroup.org) Heavyweight conflict resolution think-tank, regularly producing excellent reports and analyses of the current Afghan situation.

Juldu.com (www.juldu.com) Comprehensive travel site for trekking in the Wakhan Corridor and the Afghan Pamir.

Kabul Caravan (www.kabulcaravan.com) Countrywide travel information for Afghanistan, run by the main author of this guidebook.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) The dedicated Central Asia branch of the Thorn Tree forum is one of the best places to get up-to-date travellers' reports on Afghanistan.

Luke Powell (www.lukepowell.com) Beautiful photographs of Afghanistan from before and after the war.

Moby Capital (www.mobycapital.com) Hard to beat daily email service collating news on Afghanistan from the world's media.

Relief Web (www.reliefweb.int) Provides excellent coverage from a humanitarian slant, with news and press releases from the UN and many non government organisations.

Survival Guide to Kabul (www.kabulguide.net) An indispensable resource to the city, aimed primarily at expat workers, and with an excellent bulletin board for up-to-the-minute goings on.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

KABUL EXPLORER

One Week

It's easy to get swept up in the hectic atmosphere of **Kabul** (p79), a city struggling through the birth pangs of recovery. There's an enormous amount to check out – the battered but recently reopened Kabul Museum, the wonderfully restored Babur's Gardens and the OMAR Landmine Museum. Take time to experience some of the more traditional corners too, such as the birdsellers of Ka Faroshi and the hustle of Mandayi Market along Kabul River. If you're lucky, you might be in time for a kite-flying festival or a winter game of *buzkashi* – Afghan polo, played with a dead goat. A walk along the old city walls can bring some welcome relief from Kabul's infamous bad air.

For real refreshment, get out of the city. A short drive north across the Shomali Plain will bring you to the traditional mountain village of **Istalif** (p107). The village is famous for its rustic pottery – a great souvenir. Don't forget to stop to buy sweet grapes from roadside sellers on the Shomali Plain. Carrying along the same road, switch northeast as the mountains rise to enter the **Panjshir Valley** (p110). Panjshir was home to the legendary mujaheddin commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who never allowed it to be captured by the Soviets or the Taliban; his grave lies halfway up the valley.

Closer to home, **Qargha Lake** (p108) is a popular picnic getaway for Kabulis. You can even tee off here for a round at the Kabul Golf Club. The damaged model village of **Paghman** (p108) is nearby – battered but green, and with tremendous views that are worth a detour.

If you're short of time or just based in the capital, this itinerary offers a series of day trips to get you out of the city and give you a quick taste of Afghanistan at large.



HIPPY TRAIL

Two to Three Weeks

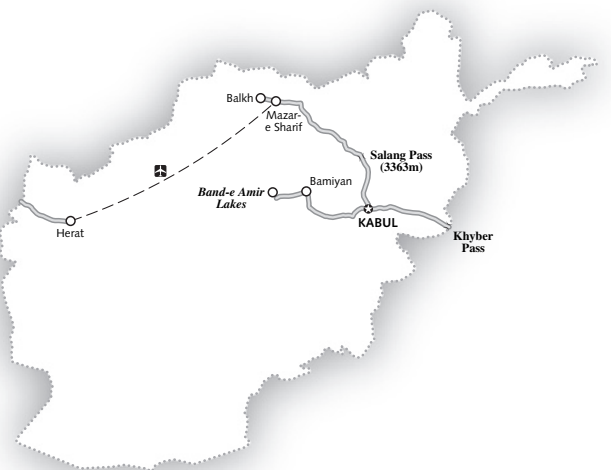
Enter Afghanistan by crossing the Iranian border near Mashhad and head to the old Silk Road city of **Herat** (p132). There's an enormous amount to see and do here, from taking in the views from the imposing Citadel to admiring the fabulous mosaic tiling of the Friday Mosque.

After a few days, strike northwest – by air rather than land, as the latter remains a tricky security prospect. At **Mazar-e Sharif** (p148) the blue domes of the Shrine of Hazrat Ali mark Afghanistan's holiest site. The ruins of once-mighty **Balkh** (p155) are a stone's throw away, with crumbling city walls and ancient mosques.

As you leave Mazar-e Sharif, the plains gradually rise into the Hindu Kush mountains. Cross the **Salang Pass** (p112), the main route between north and south Afghanistan. Although the road is good, the traffic is crazy, so you'll be pleased to arrive in the capital, **Kabul** (p79). This is a city with lots to experience, from Mughal gardens to mine museums, as well as Chicken Street – one of the hubs of the Hippy Trail in the 1970s. Kabul's lively restaurant scene will also make a change from the usual diet of kebabs and rice.

From Kabul, allow several days to make a side trip to **Bamiyan** (p114). The Taliban-destroyed Buddha statues have left a yawning hole, but the valley is still one of the most beautiful in Afghanistan. It's a short drive from here to the gorgeous blue lakes of **Band-e Amir** (p122).

Returning to Kabul, you can head for the Pakistan border. Leave Afghanistan through the **Khyber Pass** (p185), an iconic travel experience that has been the gateway to the Indian subcontinent throughout the centuries.



If you have a few weeks to spare, this version of the over-land itinerary is the perfect introduction to Afghanistan, taking in the best of its cities, scenery and culture.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

ACROSS THE CENTRE

Three Weeks

Start your trip in **Kabul** (p79), enjoying its amenities before hitting the rough and ready road ahead.

From Kabul enjoy the good highway across the Shomali Plain, until the road switches west towards **Bamiyan** (p114). The route is bad, but never less than spectacular. If possible, make a stop at the spectacular ruins of **Shahr-e Zohak** (p119) that cling to the red cliffs at the entrance of the Bamiyan valley. Bamiyan is a relaxing place to catch your breath for a few days. Take time to check out the weird geology of nearby **Darya Ajdahr** (p120).

Heading west, the dazzling **Band-e Amir Lakes** (p122), the colour of Afghan lapis lazuli, are an essential stop. From here, the obvious overnight stop is at **Yawkawlang** (p125).

It's a long drive to the regional hub of **Chaghcheran** (p126), over a series of dramatic mountain passes and along narrow valleys. It's the best place to arrange a vehicle to the astounding **Minaret of Jam** (p126), the lonely sentinel left from the Ghorid empire. If you're lucky you'll see camel caravans of nomads along the way.

From Jam, head for **Chist-e Sharif** (p128) with its ruined domed tombs, and the hot springs of **Obey** (p128). Finally, rejoice as the tarmac road reappears, to whisk you along the final stretch to **Herat** (p132), which has all the amenities of a large city.



AFGHAN TURKESTAN

Two Weeks

Having enjoyed a few days in **Kabul** (p79), take the road north towards the **Salang Pass** (p112). Once the mountains have been crossed, head northeast towards **Kunduz** (p160), one of the medieval city-states of the north. Crossing the deserts nearby you'll arrive at **Ai Khanoum** (p162), the remains of the easternmost Greek City in the world, looking across the river into Tajikistan.

Backtrack via **Pul-e Khumri** (p140) and continue northwest, break your trip at **Samangan** (p158) to marvel at the Buddhist stupa of Takht-e Ros-tam. The road continues through the dizzying gorge of **Tangi Tashkurgan** (p158), where roadside sellers offer juicy pomegranates and figs. Having stocked up, take a few days rest at **Mazar-e Sharif** (p148), home to the Shrine of Hazrat Ali and its flocks of pure white doves.

Just outside Mazar-e Sharif is **Balkh** (p155), once the 'Mother of Cities' according to the Arab conquerors. They left Afghanistan's oldest mosque on the outskirts of the town. The road continues west through **Shiberghan** (p145), where the land starts to turn to desert. At the end of the tarmac is the Turkmen and Uzbek town of **Andkhoi** (p144), a centre of carpet production that hosts a fabulous market twice a week.

If you're feeling sturdy, a rough track bumps across the desert to **Maimana** (p143), another old city-state, now a quiet market town with a large Uzbek population.



TAILORED TRIPS

WAKHAN & PAMIR EXPLORER

Three to Four Weeks

This trip into the Wakhan Corridor is highly seasonal and can only be attempted between May and September. Before setting out on this mountain adventure, you'll need to spend some time checking the current requirements for permits (p168), which change regularly. From **Kabul** (p79) drive north to **Faizabad** (p164), the capital of Badakhshan province. It's a two-day drive needing an overnight stay in **Kunduz** (p160), but there are regular flights if you're pushed for time.

In Faizabad, make sure that all your paperwork is in order to allow you to head deep into the mountains, and arrange food and 4WD transport to take you past **Ishkashim** (p167).

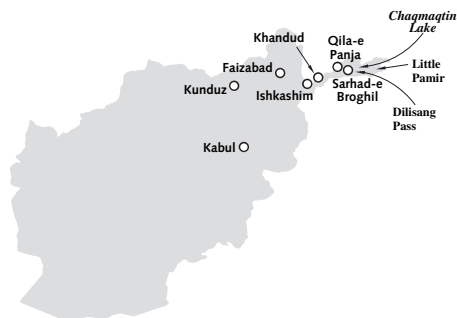
From Ishkashim it's a two day drive through stunning mountain scenery to **Sarhad-e Broghil** (p170). You'll overnight at **Khandud** (p169) in the Lower

Wakhan, or **Qila-e Panja** (p170), where you can camp near an old royal hunting lodge. It's possible to trek the 90km to Sarhad-e Broghil, which is useful for acclimatisation. The road runs out here at any case.

Sarhad-e Broghil is the trailhead for treks into the **Little Pamir** (p171). It's possible to arrange horses or yaks here for riding or baggage. The Little Pamir is an area of wide alpine grassland 100km long. It's perfect for trekking, and if you're lucky you might spot Marco Polo sheep, or even a snow leopard.

The nomadic Kyrgyz herd their flocks amid their yurts here. **Chaqmaqtiin Lake** (p172) makes a good trekking destination – a ten-day round trip from the entrance to the Little Pamir.

With sufficient advance preparation, it's possible to trek into Pakistan over the **Dilisang Pass** (p172), a demanding 12-day trek requiring mountaineering experience.



On the Road



PAUL CLAMMER *Coordinating Author*

For me, late summer is the best time to be in Afghanistan, and researching this book was no exception. I missed out on the winter *buzkashi* (Afghan rugby on horseback, with a dead goat) season, but there was ample compensation in the endless fruit – sweet grapes from the Shomali Plain, fat Kandahari pomegranates and melons everywhere. The country might not be the most straightforward to write a travel guide for, dealing with terrible roads and security concerns, but the rewards (like so many things unexpected in Afghanistan) were always the sweetest.

DON'T MISS!

Any trip to Afghanistan should start by entering through the Khyber Pass (p185). I'll stop in Kabul (p79) to catch up with friends before heading out of the city for the vistas of Bamiyan (p114) and the Band-e Amir lakes (p122). If I can brave the bad roads I'd bump my way to the Minaret of Jam (p126), or fly from Kabul to finish in Herat (p132), my favourite Afghan city.

PAUL'S BIO

Paul grew up near Cambridge. After a false start as a molecular biologist he spent several years kicking around the Islamic world from Casablanca to Kashgar, eventually becoming a tour guide in Morocco, Turkey and Pakistan. Having watched *The Man Who Would Be King* at an impressionable age, the Khyber Pass was always in his sights, and in 2001 he finally made it to Afghanistan, only to find himself having dinner with two Taliban ministers a fortnight before the September 11 attacks. When the dust settled he wrote *Kabul Caravan*, one of the first travel websites dedicated to Afghanistan, and is now the first Lonely Planet writer to cover the country since the mid-1970s.

See contributing author bios on p236.



Opposite: The trinket trade still flourishes in Herat (p132)

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